



Queensland University of Technology
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'Theatre and Beyond - The Application of Theatre Directing to Other Contexts'

© 2006 Chris Willems *GradDipArtsAdmin MA*

Abstract:

At a time when theatre practitioners and companies are concerned with dwindling audience numbers, funding and interest (so what's new?), what this paper discusses is less about theatre 'changing direction' and more about 'changing theatre Direction'.

A subtle semantic shift perhaps but one which has proven enormously useful over 25 years as a professional creator, director, performer, designer and teacher for stage, screen – and other contexts.

Applying theatrical skills to apparently unrelated contexts is not new, however it bears re-examining. My own experience as a 'directorial specialist' in mime and movement confirms the fundamental theatricality in all human communication – whether stage, screen, auditorium or meeting room – I would argue that there is no professional context completely devoid of some measure of 'performance'.

And if you're going to do performance, however minutely, subtly and in whatever context, at least make it the best performance you can by 'directing it'.

This paper examines the adaptation of theatre direction to other contexts and discusses:-

- which other contexts
- directing non-performers
- what theatre direction provides

Introduction:

In contextual terms, my professional background is multi-disciplinary – encompassing theatre, television, media, music, tertiary education and corporate training contexts. As such it has inevitably been extremely diverse - my professional focus has been and continues to be 'specialised multi-skilling' and multi-artform – in an effort to be multi-employable – to have established and sustained a realistic professional arts career over more than 25 years.

It is also inter-disciplinary, and much of the evolution of my professional activity and career has been concerned with the commonality of different artistic mediums and forms and how, where and why these professional disciplines:-

- intersect
- interact
- inform each other

– and therefore how they support each other - rather than losing creative/professional opportunities because of areas where they might conflict.

These inter-relationships manifest themselves – consciously and unconsciously - through a range of ongoing professional activities in which I continue to be involved, and which I inevitably bring to the tertiary context – currently as a Lecturer in Performance and Design in a university, but also across various other tertiary/professional environments including actor training, television presenter coaching etc.

Renowned Australian author Peter Carey (2006, p. 14) recently suggested that, *'you follow your life, you choose the thing that energises you at the time'*. Well the thing that currently energises me and holds my professional attention (and which is also the focus of my Doctoral research) is how my range of performance and directorial skills and experience applies to Corporate (or inter-professional) Communication.

Definitions & Context:

Now the term 'corporate' can present some difficulties of connotation these days. What with the recent proliferation of high-profile corporate collapses - (in)famous Australian and international examples of corporate dishonesty and corruption – apparently (judging by media reports) underpinned by a complete lack of ethics, morals or integrity in senior management – with the result that the term 'corporate' has become tainted in the minds of many.

However I use the term corporate in its 'corporeal' sense.

The Macquarie Dictionary (1992, p. 99) lists the words **Corporeal** – defined as, '*of the nature of the physical body*'; **Corporate** – defined as, '*pertaining to a united body, as of persons*' – and **Corporation** – defined as, '*an association of individuals*', adjacent to each other. One would like to think that this is more than mere alphabetical coincidence – that the words actually bear some significant connection to one another. And it is in this sense – the '*association of individuals*' together with the '*nature of the physical body*' – that my work, and research, resides.

Therefore, I am suggesting that the negative perceptual definition of the word 'corporate' – i.e. large, uncaring, and corrupt multinational - can be jettisoned for the time being and the title applied in a broader, and indeed truer sense – not only the 'corporeal' sense but also to a much smaller and dare we say, 'sensitive' and caring corporate entity, the individual - in particular, the individual Artist.

I'm fairly certain that most Artists would not immediately associate themselves with the term 'corporate', however as a business – SME or micro-business – the individual artist (or indeed collection of individual artists coming together for a project) has to deal with many of the same issues – for example:

- sourcing investment/funding
- project planning and monitoring
- creating their product/service (art)
- promotion and marketing
- attracting significant numbers of audience/consumers
- hiring staff/technical support

- costs of doing business
- managing sales
- dealing with suppliers and other business entities
- financial reporting
- dealing with media, etc, etc

This view is supported by Craig Mudge (2006, p. 16), Director of Macquarie University's Institute for Innovation, who recently wrote with reference to executives *'making meaning'* – that successful business is more than just focussing exclusively on making money, and that *'frequently artistic people do not have the skills to fully capitalise and exploit their talents'* – also that *'Artists and other creative people can learn how to be enterprising without sacrificing their integrity. They can learn the skills that will empower them to make meaning'*.

Not only can they, but it is absolutely crucial for their professional survival that they must – whether they want to or not, or whether they believe they can or not. As Mudge observes, *'many creative people, especially when young, may believe enterprise and innovation are categories that more properly belong to the suits - the business types and their beancounters'*. No matter how philosophically or professionally unpalatable the notion of 'business' and entrepreneurship might appear at the time when they just want to get on with the art, as an artist one reaches the point of being forced to be *'the entrepreneur you are, when you're not an entrepreneur'* (Willems & Hughes-Lucas 2005) and to regard their work – or at least the promotion of that work - as a business. They may not regard themselves as 'corporate' but any differences are essentially just a matter of scale and possibly style of approach – the consistent underlying requirement being that of **effective communication** – of an idea, a concept, a business plan or a piece of art.

In terms of survival – business or artistic – it is about professional interactions. It is about any kind of professional interaction in any kind of professional context. Therefore, in principle, I would argue that the notion of 'corporate communication' applies equally to the individual artist, as it does to the multinational corporation, and my professional interest lies in that broader context and application.

And the common thread with communication across these disparate, diverse disciplines, dealings and contexts, is that they benefit from Directorial input.

Corporate Communication & Mime?

The extensive consultancy work I have done in the private and public sectors over the past several years has been concerned with presentation and communication coaching of high-level corporate professionals - CEO's, board members, managing directors, politicians, executive teams etc - as well as individual business operators and performing artists. My 25 year background in mime & movement performance is brought to bear in imparting very specific and individually tailored and targeted skills in analysis, control and utilisation of appropriate 'non-verbals' in the corporate communication context.

In broad terms, this kind of corporate communication coaching is not particularly new. If one scans the available professional literature, it is clear that bookshop shelves are groaning with any number of books and publications – in addition to consultancies - extensively covering the topic of Corporate Communication. Many of these are typically generalist in nature and deal with the broad scope of the field – written communication, presentation, inter-office communication, meeting procedures etc - yet reasonably detailed, in a general kind of way, within those respective areas of focus.

By contrast, my approach is very specific - through the application of mime performance and directing skills to inter-professional communication – with particular and detailed emphasis upon the physicality of presentation and communication, beyond generic body-language analysis. And whilst Alan Pease (1981/94, p. 3) has become justifiedly famous for his excellent book(s) on Body Language – works which may indeed be useful *'to obtain a better understanding of life's most complex event – a face-to-face encounter with another person'*, my approach, whilst informed by the principles proposed and generally accepted by Pease and others (including Desmond Morris in various highly credentialed publications over the decades such as *'The Naked Ape'*, *'The Human Zoo'* and *'Manwatching'* etc – about 'species-specific' physicality of interaction), is less general and more specifically tailored - 'individualised' - introducing and applying the notion of the 'physicality of performance'.

What this refers to is that whilst we've all been living pretty comfortably in our bodies for the past 20, 30, 40 or 50 years - we very rarely think about what our bodies are expressing. We assume that by default, our body will reflect our words, emotions and attitudes – and generally it does. But there are times when we don't want our body to reflect the fact that, whilst giving a presentation, we are crippled by fear and we just want to run away - we need to find a way of 'physically lying' in order to create a different perception.

Given that Mime as a performance artform, at its most fundamental level, essentially consists of the analysis, manipulation and stylisation of body language in order to create a character, impart a narrative and touch the emotions of the audience, my approach in the corporate context similarly involves those same Mime techniques – albeit in a ‘softer’ style. Having analysed and assessed the nature and manifestation of someone’s particular physicality, we are then in a position to utilise that to advantage to enhance inter-professional communication.

Whilst many think of Mime as ‘exaggerated movement’, it is in fact, entirely the opposite. It is about clarity of movement, it is about uncluttered movement and it is about well-defined movement - to enable an audience to clearly interpret what it is an individual is saying, expressing or communicating – in whatever context. The word ‘individual’ is very much the operative word here - I often find myself telling corporate clients that mine is not a ‘sausage factory’ approach, because it is not.

‘Physical Personality’:

Just as each of us has a unique personality, we equally have a unique ‘physical personality’. My approach is therefore highly individualised, personalised and adapted for that person in particular – based on their existing individual physicality - adapting the principles of mime performance to not only suit, but indeed utilise, that set of physical attributes, habits and idiosyncrasies. This is not that different to a Theatre Director utilising an actor’s physical attributes to create a clearly defined character for stage performance.

Now whilst Parry & Hansen (2006, p. 2) might conceivably argue that all this becomes irrelevant if we accept their contention that the ‘Story becomes the Leader’ – that leadership is more about the corporate story because *‘people follow the story more so than they follow the person who composes or tells the story’* - I suggest that even if that were proven to be the case, the person telling the story needs to do so in a confident, credible and convincing manner – otherwise the story will have neither initial impact, nor ongoing life.

This view is reinforced by Helen Besly (2004, p. 1), Managing Director of the Rowland Communication Group – an organisation specialising in high level corporate communication – suggesting that the very opposite of the Parry & Hansen view is the case, articulating her

view that *'despite the proliferation of communication channels, the individual's voice is still the most credible and relied on...that makes corporate storytelling an essential part of the CEO's job'* (emphasis added).

Hanley (2006) further supports this view with regard to the proliferation of corporate coaching and the importance placed upon communication (or storytelling) by corporate leaders - *'The demand for coaching has been boosted by a corporate culture that increasingly embraces the twin concepts of leadership and the self – and which recognises that the right traits don't always appear automatically in those at the top... it is no longer technical capabilities...it's **you** that will make people follow or not'* (emphasis added).

What many successful executives do not immediately recognise when they reach their sought-after high-ranking position is that being the leader of an organisation is a fundamentally different job to being the outstanding accountant, lawyer, artist, engineer, or whatever, that they had been up to this point. The new position is usually much more about 'communication' than being technically proficient. The place coaching holds in this scenario is, as Hanley (2006) notes, *'an explicit recognition that leadership is a skill distinct from technical management ability'*. And further, quoting Chip Macfarlane, *'a director and master coach at the IEC'* (Institute of Executive Coaching), *'... "many lose their sense of self in the struggle to get to the top... (they) went through the workplace with a certain set of norms, and now they are being asked to do something different – not just from what they were doing before, but different from their predecessor"...'*

So, in the new position in which executives find themselves, there is a danger of that executive not communicating sufficiently clearly and/or not communicating at all. In this context, Hanley (2006) quotes Frank Francis (Chief Operating Officer at insurance company Vero), who refers to his own experience of having created a misperception about his professional self where *'the people who worked with me directly...understood me well, but I wasn't always portraying that same image to others outside that circle...you might just have a 15-second window...in which to make an impression... (the coach) made me aware that **people have different perceptions** of me that differ from who I really am"...'* (emphasis added)

And it is consciously determining those perceptions of others that requires the kind of awareness and control of how one comes across – whether a '15-second window' or a 30 minute presentation – the first impressions, according to Albert Mehrabian's (1981, p. 76) oft quoted figures, are created in the first few seconds, with 55% of meaning in the physical;

38% in how one's words are spoken, and only 7% in the actual words used. Once formed, those perceptions are difficult to change. And it is in shaping those initial audience perceptions that there is a role for the Director – to highlight, and assist in developing, the 'corporate performer's' awareness, stage presence, confidence and communication competence.

The Nature of Perception:

As Besly (2004, p. 1) notes, *'every interaction...is an opportunity to influence perceptions, both of the CEO and the organisation...it's the moment of influence and it's precious...the moment when the CEO and the company are judged'*.

And as theatre practitioners, I'm sure we have all discovered that perception is what it's all about - and what happens when audience **mis**perceptions create all kinds of unintended narrative outcomes. The nature of Perception is perhaps best articulated by renowned stage, screen and medical polymath, Jonathan Miller (1995) who describes perception as,

...a negotiation between the creative viewer and the object that is in front of the eye - and that hunches, guesses, prejudices, preoccupations, interests and so forth, alter the experience so that what you know, what you think, what you imagine, what you anticipate, have an irreversible effect on what you experience. And this isn't a sign of the fickle instability of the character, it's a sign of the structure of perception in general. That's what perception is like, that it's a process of guessing as well as seeing what is out there

Jonathan Miller 1995

Certainly, in Mime, all kinds of strange audience perceptions can be formed if the work is not clear. And once you've lost them it's very difficult to get them back. So, whoever your audience is, and whatever perceptual filter they bring to your presentation – the clearer you can be, the more likely it is that the perceptions formed will be what you want them to be.

Directorial Approach:

So, if Mime is the analysis, manipulation and stylisation of Body Language - in performance terms - there seems, to me at least, an inescapable logic in applying that to Corporate Presentation. As with Mime, we are talking about the detailed Analysis, Manipulation and

Stylisation of individual human physicality to support, clarify and enhance the non-verbal aspects of communication in the professional context. Once again, the operative word is **individual**. This individually unique physical personality is the base material with which I work – to develop a credible presentation performance – without changing the fundamental way the corporate presenter moves – without losing the essential ‘them-ness’ of being physically who they individually are.

So there is a **diagnostic** aspect to the corporate work I do – just as there is a diagnostic aspect to directing in the theatre - it depends largely on the individual physicality and attributes of the client/presenter. So, in answer to that most commonly asked question ‘*what do I do with my hands?*’ – there are as many answers to that as there are people asking the question.

And one of the most gratifying things about this kind of work is that it is so highly personalised and individualised – in both approach and outcomes.

Directing Non-Performers:

As discussed earlier, a fairly common thread with new CEO’s in particular, is that some initially fail to realise that their new job is a different job – it is no longer just about technical skill. It is about imparting information, it is about leadership, it is about communication and mostly it is about shaping perceptions. It is about representing oneself and an organisation **comfortably, confidently and credibly**.

However for most of those Executives, the notion of ‘performance’ may be something quite foreign. In many cases they are essentially non-performers thrust onto the Stage to perform – some more willingly than others - but often inadequately equipped to do so. It is pointless to expect that ‘performance experience’ can be acquired instantly. So, in the immediate term, they need guidance, they need confidence, and most of all, they need Direction. Because, they are not actors, they are not trained to be actors and if they try to ‘act’, or be someone that they’re not, they simply don’t come across as genuine – simply because it isn’t genuine. Some indeed regard the notion of performance as ‘faking it’ and being insincere. But that is the whole point - ultimately, they have to remain fundamentally themselves.

As a 'corporate performer' they have to perform yet still retain the essential 'them-ness' of who they are - so what they need to develop is **performance awareness**. And making the corporate 'performer' aware is the essential part of the Director's job. It's about developing a consciousness - in and of performance.

The Performance of Presentation and the Presentation of Performance:

Based on my professional performance experience, I maintain the view that in any kind of public presentation, there is no such thing as Naturalism, only 'degrees of Stylisation'.

If for example we take the situation of the performing artist, whilst the artist is in the act of performing, they are obviously communicating closely and effectively with their audience, *'it's your job, really, (to) take people on an emotional journey so you have to really throw yourself into that'* (Blunt 2006), however in those non-performance moments - when the artist (performing or otherwise) has to communicate to other interested parties such as investors, interviewers, sponsors etc - they may become a mess of inarticulate babbling, simply because they are not in 'performance' mode and are thus ill-prepared, unrehearsed and unconvincing – sending out entirely the wrong message.

Upon recently discussing this notion with a group of executive workshop participants, one observed that perhaps this was the reason so many 'award-acceptance speeches' are so incredibly awful and the performing artist comes across so badly. This might, on observation, be difficult to refute, supporting the argument that - if we apply as above the notion of the individual artist as a mini-corporation - then this is a perfect example of how in non-performance mode, that mini-corporate executive might have 'blown it' in that crucial moment of influence - when applying a modest amount of performance-awareness and effort might have dramatically improved the situation and created a very different 'first impression'.

Content & Context:

If indeed there is, as mentioned above, no such thing as Naturalism, only 'degrees of Stylisation', then I also maintain that the degree of stylisation appropriate for any given performing situation, is determined by both the **content** of the material being presented and

the **context** in which that material is being presented – whether in a theatrical play, a film, television, or a corporate boardroom.

As Collins (1998, p. 12) suggests, *'the audience may come to the proceedings feeling either ambivalent or goodwill towards the speaker. Most of them know why they are there and what they want to get out of the event: some clear insights and ideas on some points at issue **delivered in a clear, interesting and enjoyable way**'*. (emphasis added)

A formal presentation to an audience of 1000 in an auditorium is different to a semi-formal presentation to an audience of 10 professional colleagues in a meeting room at lunchtime, is different to a presentation to the Board of an organisation in a Boardroom, is different to a performance in a music venue, is different to a hostile public meeting of local residents with issues, resentment and revenge in their hearts! Whilst all of these situations (and many others) call, in fundamental terms, for information to be imparted and the opportunity for questions to be asked and answered, each represents a very different presenting context. It is that context which will determine how one approaches the presenting situation – in both substance and style.

What Does Theatre Direction provide?

Just because you walk onto a stage in front of an audience it does not automatically follow that that audience is going to take any notice of you. You have to **make** the audience look at you – even if you're apparently doing nothing. Not only do you have to make them look at you, but you have to make them look at whatever part of your body, or the surrounding environment, you want them to look at, or engage with.

This is performance. This is clarity. This is managing audience perceptions. This requires Direction – whether internal or external - usually both. The very basics of Directed performance teaches us how to walk across a stage; how to take command of the space; how to engage an audience; how to clearly tell a story.

So, why shouldn't Theatre Direction be useful in other contexts? - whether it is the 'Theatre of Theatre' or the 'Theatre of Business'.

Whether we're talking about:

- Actors
- CEO's
- Senior Executives
- Board members
- Politicians
- Sportspeople
- Television presenters
- Musicians
- Scientists
- Educators

It's all 'theatre', it's all connected...and ideally, it's all **Directed**.

Chris Willems *GradDipArtsAdmin MA*

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